

Autonomy, Federalism or the Unthinkable? Indonesian Debates and the Future of West Papua

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Abstract

The Melanesian people of the Indonesian province of Papua/Irian Jaya have never accepted rule from Jakarta since they were forcibly incorporated into the unitary republic of Indonesia by President Sukarno during 1962-1963. However after the collapse of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998 it became possible for the Papuans to openly criticize Indonesian rule and for Indonesians to discuss forms of autonomy and federalism which would in principle moderate Papuans' hostility to their inclusion in the republic. Debates in Jakarta have produced a consensus in favour of offering "special autonomy" (not yet defined) to Papua-- and also to Aceh-- in addition to the "regional autonomy" which is being extended to all Indonesian provinces and regencies from January 1, 2001. Even this "ordinary" autonomy should entail a generous boost to Papua's provincial revenue and budget. However Indonesian debates and Jakarta's policy offerings have done little to reassure the Papuans, who continue to suffer violations of their rights at the same time that their new post-1998 leaders, who support a peaceful resolution of Papua's grievances, are being arrested and silenced. The Papuans remain intent on achieving independence—and with good reason.

Key Words: Papua, Indonesia, autonomy, federalism, secession

Introduction

The Dutch withheld sovereignty over West New Guinea when the rest of the Netherlands Indies was transformed into the republic of Indonesia during 1949-50. But by 1963 they no longer felt able to resist the multiple international pressures to relinquish sovereignty which they faced in New Guinea as President Sukarno stepped up a military campaign to forcibly "liberate" the territory, and Washington concluded that continuing Dutch sovereignty would radicalize Indonesian politics to the benefit of the *Partai Komunis Indonesia* and its external supporter at the time, the People's Republic of China. Thus it was that the Dutch broke their promise of a separate self-determination for the Papuans and, together with Indonesia, signed the New York Agreement of 1962, which provided for a transitional UN authority in West New Guinea leading to Indonesian control of the territory in 1963 and for a so-called Act of Free Choice in 1969, which proved to be "free of choice" in practice. From that year West Papua became the 26th province of Indonesia, first as Irian Barat (West Irian), later as Irian Jaya ("victorious Irian"). And thus it was that Papua's strongly aroused desire for independence of the early 1960s was flouted

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over the following 40 years.

As a consequence Papua suffered not only ferocious repression of its independence movement, the OPM (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka*), but also ruthless exploitation of its mineral and other bounteous resources, with almost no benefit flowing to the Papuan people themselves. Indonesia also encouraged both official ("*transmigrasi*") and unofficial ("spontaneous") immigration which threatened to make the Papuans a minority in their own land within a generation.

The Suharto New Order (1966-98) in Indonesia was followed by a period of partial liberalization and limited democratization under, first, Jusuf Habibie, and now, since October 1999, Abdurrahman Wahid. In the expanded political space available it became possible for the Papuans to openly air their grievances and for the Indonesians to debate alternatives to the unitary and highly centralized and authoritarian state of Suharto. At the height of Jakarta's permissiveness the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya was actually renamed "Papua" by President Wahid (Gus Dur) on New Year's Day 2000 in deference to Papuan wishes. It seemed that a *modus vivendi* leading to a negotiated settlement of some kind was possible. But following a symbolic "declaration of non-integration" by a specially convened *Kongres Rakyat Papua* in June 2000, a recalcitrant Indonesian parliament, Cabinet and Vice President have refused to go along with the President's strategy of conciliating the Papuans through dialogue. The province has evidently been un-renamed and the new "post-OPM" leadership which emerged in Papua after 1998 has been decimated by arrests.

This article explores the Indonesian debates that have taken place and still continue around concepts of autonomy and federalism as well as independence—debates which, if followed through and resolved imaginatively and constructively, might yet save Papua from the renewed violence which seems inevitable if Jakarta resorts to all-out military and police repression of the Papuans for merely expressing their long-standing desire for independence.

Autonomy, Federalism or Independence for Papua?

Given a free choice the Papuan majority in Irian would plainly prefer independence to continuing incorporation in Indonesia. They seek a future oriented to their fellow Melanesians in the South Pacific islands where their plea for self-determination is belatedly beginning to attract serious support. Nauru and Vanuatu pushed the issue of Papuan self-determination at both the Millennium Summit in New York during September 2000 and at the Pacific Islands Forum heads of government meeting in Kiribati during October 2000. On the other hand the substantial Indonesian minority in Irian (about 800,000 of the 2.1 million people counted in the 2000 census) would clearly be happy with the regional autonomy which is being fitfully extended to all the 300 plus regencies and 32 provinces of *Indonesia Raya* from New Year's Day 2001. Jakarta seems nevertheless determined to thrust an undefined special autonomy on her two most troublesome provinces, Papua and Aceh, from May 2001. In any case the Papuans are resisting any version of autonomy

loudly and strongly—particularly any imposed version (no decentralization without negotiation), and above all an imposed version including the proposal launched under President Habibie to split Irian into three separate provinces, which is still being pushed by the Irian governor (*koridor.com*, 9/1/01) but which has been widely condemned as a divide-and-rule tactic.

However autonomy on the way to independence is not necessarily an evil. It is well known that Bishop Belo and the Fretilin leaders of East Timor would have preferred a much longer gestation period under Indonesian sovereignty than they were eventually given in 1999. Habibie's surprise proposal for a referendum on independence in January 1999 opened the way to the disruptions and disasters which were inflicted on the Timorese people by the Indonesian army (TNI) and its puppet Timorese militias throughout that year, but especially in the period after the August 30th referendum and before the arrival of the UN-sponsored and Australian-led International Force East Timor (InterFET) on September 20th (TAUDEVIN, 2000). The killings, wanton destruction and enforced expulsions of September 1999 seem to have fully justified the caution of Timor's leaders, but they have at least made a quick break from an Indonesia which, one year later, was showing signs of turning back the clock of *reformasi* as Gus Dur's leadership came under strong challenge not only from the parliament but also from a politically reviving military. Gus Dur was forced to share power with Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri, was frustrated in his attempt to install a strongly pro-reform general at the head of the army and began to seem powerless to stop the return to a hard line against the aggrieved people of Aceh and Papua.

In any case, of course, there is always the chance that Gus Dur, who is clinically blind and in poor health, will die or become incapacitated in office even if he does succeed in continuing the reform effort and mastering the unresolved inter-communal conflicts and bloodshed which are a grave problem in several other provinces beside the two most troubled ones. In that event it might be a benefit indeed --for Aceh or Papua--to have already parted definitively with Indonesia for good. Nevertheless one distinguished expert in Jakarta, J. B. Kristiadi of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, has made the reassuring suggestion that

If the Papuans want to be free, they should not separate themselves from Indonesia, just from the looting and bribery of the central government. Special autonomy can accommodate this...President Abdurrahman Wahid's government is democratic and not repressive (*Tempo*, 7/6/00).

But the Papuans can hardly be expected to take this seriously in the light of Indonesian history where "special autonomy" has been offered or instituted and ignored before—in both Papua and Aceh, actually. A few Papuans do envisage a long transition to independence, but the Papuan mood is undoubtedly for the earliest possible independence, which would liberate them not only from Indonesian looting and bribery but systematic violence as well. The Papua Presidium Council (PPC), which emerged as the effective voice of the Papuan people during a national consultation meeting in February 2000, largely yielded to this mood for most of the year 2000 until five of its key leaders were arrested in November—ironically just as they were attempting to moderate the campaign for independence

(KING, 2000; *Agence France Presse*, 29/11/00).

It was current Vice President of the PPC and the only senior leader not arrested in the November crackdown, Tom Beanal, who led the so-called Team 100 (*Tim Seratus*) of representatives of Papua's regions to Jakarta in February 1999 where they launched demand for immediate independence from then President Habibie. This demand may be viewed in retrospect as a necessary shock tactic which finally persuaded Jakarta that there was a problem and an issue—it signalled (perhaps) the end of the “only a handful of dissident Papuans want independence” mentality. Nevertheless when the PPC organized the Papuan People's Congress in Jayapura during May/June 2000 and declared that Papua had never been a part of Indonesia, Jakarta was once again professing shock about the independence demand and will presumably continue to do so. This is standard tactics, but there are important divisions in the Indonesian camp which it is important for the Papuan side to understand, exploit and perhaps in the longer term overcome. Equally, as the Papuan historian Benny Giay would insist, it is important for Papuans to understand and manage or overcome the divisions on their own side-- over the issue of autonomy versus independence, for instance--and to avoid becoming victims of Indonesian divide-and-rule tactics.²

Despite the divisions in its own ranks the Indonesian government during the course of 1999-2000 did produce proposals on regional autonomy which at least purported to address the grievances of its alienated provinces, and they are discussed below. Unfortunately the proposals themselves and the debate that developed around them only served to reinforce the impression that the government in Jakarta was incapable of overcoming its own divisions, hesitations and incompetence sufficiently to present proposals plausibly able to resolve what had become in essence a crisis of the unitary republic declared by Sukarno in 1945. We can usefully sum up divisions over the issues of autonomy and secession in elite Indonesian opinion under three headings.

1. The Soft Line: independence if need be

It is a moot point whether there is an Indonesian learning curve on Timor, Aceh and Papua—or only a “forgetting curve”. This is one problem for Papua and Papuans. Of course slow learning may be partly feigned as a tactic; but there is an Indonesian blind spot, affecting the vast majority of the Javanese citizenry at least, on the issue of granting self-determination/independence/secession to deeply alienated provinces. They are against it, regardless of its theoretical merits in the light of a generation or more of failed and disastrous repression in Papua, East Timor and Aceh. Nevertheless there *are* a very few advocates or tolerators of the limited, or even the extensive, breakup of the unitary republic, and we may label such as these **soft liners**. They think, for instance, that not only the Papuans but Indonesia itself would be better off if Papua were allowed to break away. And indeed there are proposals in circulation not just to free the most aggrieved provinces, Aceh and Papua, on the East Timor precedent, but for the whole of Indonesia to dissolve or

² *Interview*, Jayapura, 22/2/00. Dr Benny Giay is director of a theological training college in Jayapura and was a member of the PPC until December 2000. He has published a book dedicated to slowing down the independence movement and introducing a more reflective note into its forums (GIAY, 2000).

devolve into a group of cooperating independent states. In George Aditjondro's version: 'Let go of the [1945] Constitution and the reality is that Indonesia might become a Commonwealth of States.' (*Jakarta Post [JP]*, 3/11/99) Political observer Soedjati Jiwandono agrees--the Papuans have a right to independence: 'Unity is something you cannot force and everybody should have the right to determine what they want, including the right to be free.' Ultimately, he said after the Papuan People's Congress, "unity should bring prosperity and thus it might be better if Indonesia split into three or four prosperous countries, rather than a single unity that is not thriving and costing the people more." (*JP*, 5/6/00)

Well known political commentator and (after October 2000) Presidential press secretary Wimar Witoelar endorses this pragmatic attitude:

Human dignity and liberty are far more important than any arrangement of statehood. For the younger political generation it does not matter too much what form of autonomy, what form of federalist status or even what form of independence is granted to the provinces. As long as the people of Aceh ... are good friends with the people of Indonesia, it is fine. (*JP*, 29/6/99)

George Aditjondro also argues that the net cost to Indonesia of "losing" Papua (together with Aceh) would be no more than the past—and in large part continuing-- cost of "KKN" (*Korupsi, Kolusi dan Nepotisme*) to the people. 'In a clean Indonesia Aceh and West Papua are not needed' is his beguiling formula.³

Professor Merle Ricklefs of Melbourne University has taken a cool and quite persuasive look at the costs and benefits of separating for both sides in the Aceh and Papua conflicts. (*Email interview: JP*, 17/6/00) I would disagree with Ricklefs, however, when he argues that secession is a less serious problem now than in the 1950s because it lacks outside support. The 50s "secession" movements were principally aimed at forcing a change of government and political orientation in Jakarta; and outside support in the contemporary situation, especially for Papua, will faithfully appear when attempts to suppress or punish a fully mobilized independence movement lead to gross human rights abuse, as they did in Timor. Together with George Aditjondro, I would also, disagree emphatically with Ricklefs' conclusion that the cost-benefit analysis for unitary (or rump) Indonesia as a whole "is clear enough—the costs would be greater than the benefits," especially because of loss of resources. But continuing the New Order's repression in Aceh and Papua will not only cost Indonesia crucial international economic and financial support in the long run but quite likely will unleash forces that terminate her own fledgling democracy as well.

In any case there is no guarantee that the giant resource projects in these provinces will continue to be cash cows for Jakarta in the teeth of local resentment over outside control and exploitation of them. Papua New Guinea's loss of the huge Bougainville copper mine to "secessionist" sabotage should be kept in mind. Ricklefs may be right that an inevitably inexperienced and inadequate Papuan leadership would be "prey to all sorts of unscrupulous

³ Address to the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (West Papua Project) Conference on *West Papua at the Crossroads: an Uncertain Future*, International House, University of Sydney, 19 April 2000.

